

The syllabus for

Issues in American Consumer Culture Comm 499

**Annenberg School for Communication
University of Southern California
Prof. Chris Smith
Fall 2005**

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Class meets: TBD**

Academic Integrity Policy:

The Annenberg School for Communication is committed to upholding the University's Academic Integrity code as detailed in the SCampus Guide. It is the policy of the School for Communication to report all violations of the code. Any serious violation or pattern of violations of the Academic Integrity Code will result in the student's expulsion from the Communication major or minor, or from the graduate program.

Objectives & Overview

This four-unit undergraduate, upper division class concerns the rise of consumption as the preeminent catalyst for social identity and national belonging in the contemporary United States. The weekly readings will chart how consumption emerged as an American ideal of social organization and explore its role in the national ethos of individualism. From an industrial angle, the course also surveys the extension of the commercial apparatus across a variety of personal communications and entertainment platforms, from cell phones to the Internet. Lectures and discussions will also consider how American consumerism has altered the nature of political engagement in the public

sphere, shifted practices of religious faith, influenced the contours of globalization, recalibrated the value of urban centers, and revised the very notion of democracy itself.

Several methods of presentation will be involved in our weekly sessions. These will include lectures by me and other Annenberg faculty, industry guest speakers from the annals of marketing, advertising, PR, and entertainment, as well as extensive audio/visual supplements.

Course Readings

Required (Available USC Bookstore):

1. **P. Bourdieu.** *Distinction.*
2. **D. Brooks.** *Bobos in Paradise.*
3. **L. Cohen.** *A Consumer's Republic.*
4. **R.J. Lifton.** *The Protean Self.*
5. **V. J. Miller.** *Consuming Religion.*
6. **Virginia Postrel.** *The Substance of Style.*
7. **J. Seabrook.** *Nobrow Culture.*
8. **Course Reader (Available at the USC Bookstore)**

The textbooks, the course reader and supplementary audio-visual material will be on 3-hour reserve in Leavey Library.

Competencies and Evaluation

Participation	10%
Take-home Midterm Exam	25%
Paper Prospectus	15%
Term Paper	25%
Take-home Final Exam	25%

Participation

I hope the reading, lectures, and your outside conversations/ruminations will make for lively discussions during our sessions together. Please come to class having completed all of the assigned reading and have questions/talking points ready when you arrive. Engaged participation, comprised by thoughtful questions and commentary as well as engaged listening, represents **10%** of your final grade.

NOTE: Even though attendance does not count toward your participation grade, attendance is expected and tardiness is to be avoided. I will take attendance each class session via a sign-in sheet. If you must arrive late or leave early, please contact me by email.

Midterm & Final Exam

The take-home midterm exam on TBD will be worth **25%** of your final grade.
The take-home final examination due on TBD will be worth **25%** of the grade.

Term Paper & Paper Prospectus

For your **term paper** (worth **25%** of the semester total), you will initiate your own research direction, probing whatever aspect of the American broadcast and cable industries you wish. This paper will be 10-15 pages, use MLA citation style, with proper footnotes, citations, etc. and sufficient references for an assignment of this type. The paper topic must be formally presented via a **paper prospectus** that will be evaluated and returned to you with meaningful feedback and a grade (**15%** of the total). More details are forthcoming on this assignment.

Week 1: Introduction, Course Overview

Lecture:

Introductions, syllabus review, goals and expectations.

Week 2: History & Theory – Origins of Consumerism

Reading:

- (CR) T.J. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, *The Culture of Consumption*, 1-38.
- (CR) Susan J. Matt, “City Women and the Quest for Status”
- (CR) Robert J. Weems, “The Birth and Development of the African American Consumer Market, 1900-1940.”

Week 3: Mass Culture, Crowded Malls, and the Consumer’s Republic

Reading:

- L. Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, Ch. 3
- (CR) J. Gilbert, “The Intellectuals and Mass Culture”
- (CR) J. Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Ch. 2
- (CR) W. Benjamin, “The Flâneur”

Week 4: Consumption and the Counterculture

Reading:

- L. Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, Ch. 7
- D. Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, selections
- (CR) T. Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, Chs. 6 & 8

Week 5: Consumption, Democracy, and Taste, Pt. 1

Reading:

- P. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, Pt. I
- (CR) R. Williams, “Taste”

Week 6: Consumption, Democracy, and Taste, Pt. 2

Reading:

- P. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, Chs. 3, 7.
- J. Seabrook, *Nobrow*, Ch. 2

Week 7: Consumption and the Collapse of Distinction, Pt. 1

Reading:

R. J. Lifton, *The Protean Self*

(CR) L. Friedman, *The Horizontal Society*, Introduction, Ch. 1

(CR) M. Diawara, “Homeboy Cosmopolitanism”

Screenings: *The Talented Mr. Ripley*; *Superfly*; **Leavey Library Reserve**

Week 8: Consumption and the Collapse of Distinction, Pt. 2

Reading:

J. Seabrook, *Nobrow*, Ch. 6

(CR) D. Zimmerman, “Six Degrees of Distinction”

Screening: *Six Degrees of Separation*; **Leavey Library Reserve**

** Take-Home Midterm Due **

Week 9: Consumption, Style, & Design

Reading:

V. Postrel, *The Substance of Style*

Week 10: Children and Consumption

Reading:

(CR) A. Quart, *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*, selections

(CR) S. Linn, *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*, selections

(CR) M. Gladwell, “The Coolhunt”

(CR) A. Kotlowitz, “False Connections”

Screening: *Merchants of Cool*

Week 11: Consumption, Surveillance, and Social Control

Reading:

(CR) M. Foucault, “Panopticism”

(CR) M. Andrejevic, *Reality TV*, “The Kinder, Gentler Gaze of Big Brother”

(CR) J. Baudrillard, “Consumer Society”

(CR) S. Harper, “Zombies, Malls, and the Consumerism Debate”

Screening: *Dawn of the Dead (1978)*; **Leavey Library Reserve**

Week 12: Consuming Identities

(CR) Lamont and Molnár, “How Blacks Use Consumption...”

(CR) H. Shugart, “Reinventing Privilege: The New (Gay) Man in Contemporary Media”

(CR) J. Arthurs, “*Sex and the City* and Consumer Culture...”

(CR) J. Schor, “What’s Wrong with Consumer Society?”

Screenings: *Fight Club*; *Sex and the City*: “A Very Vogue Idea”; **Leavey Library Reserve**

** Paper Prospectus Due **

Week 13: Consuming Faith

Reading:

Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion*, Ch. 3, “Consumer Religion”; Ch. 6, “Popular Religion in Consumer Culture”

(CR) J. Twitchell, *Branded Nation*, Ch. 2, “One Market Under God”

Week 14:

THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY – Class suspended

Week 15: Confronting Consumption

Reading:

(CR) K. Conca, “Consumption and Environment in a Global Political Economy”

(CR) E. Luttwak, “Consuming for Love”

TERM PAPER DUE: Location/Time TBD

FINAL EXAM DUE : Location/TimeTBD